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RHFJSCC/COMMARFORPAC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ PACAF HICKAM AFB HI PRIORITY
RUHBABA/CG III MEF CAMP COURTNEY JA PRIORITY
RUHBANB/COMMARCORBASESJAPAN CAMP BUTLER JA PRIORITY
RHHMBRA/COMPACFLT PEARL HARBOR HI PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI PRIORITY
RHOVVKG/COMSEVENTHFLT PRIORITY
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3606
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4351
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 2649
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 8806

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000740

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DEPARTMENT FOR P AND EAP; DOD FOR USDP; NSC FOR DNSA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: MOVING FORWARD WITH THE COBRA GOLD
EXERCISE

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Cobra Gold is America's largest multilateral exercise in Asia. Much more than a bilateral exercise with Thailand, it is a projection of American power and engagement in Asia. Cobra Gold is vital to advancing our strategic interests in Asia, including advancing regional security cooperation and engagement, winning the war on terror, maturing our joint and combined capabilities and readiness, and posturing forces for agile and responsive deployment. Cobra Gold also strengthens our relationships with key partners by enhancing multilateralism, promoting a greater role for Japan and Singapore in the region, and assisting our goal of establishing a full and normal military relationship with Indonesia. In 2005, Cobra Gold directly facilitated the U.S.-led coalition that successfully responded to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Canceling Cobra Gold this year would be unlikely to speed up Thailand's return to democracy. Post strongly recommends interagency approval for U.S. participation in Cobra Gold in 2007. End Summary.

MUCH MORE THAN A BILATERAL EXERCISE

¶2. (C) Cobra Gold is the largest joint/combined military exercise in Thailand and America's largest multilateral exercise in the Asia Pacific Region. U.S., Thai, Singaporean, Japanese and Indonesian officers are scheduled to participate in the exercise this year, which is designed to enhance our joint abilities to perform peace keeping operations and respond to contingencies. Ten other nations are scheduled to observe the exercise. The bilateral field training U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines receive during Cobra Gold is unique. Thailand offers the United States good base infrastructure, large areas in which our aircraft can conduct unrestricted simulated air operations and access to bombing ranges -- all in short supply in Asia. However, Cobra Gold is perhaps most useful in the way it supports our strategic objectives, including:

--Enhancing multilateralism. Perhaps due to their lack of a

colonial heritage, Thai leaders are more willing to host multilateral exercises than are others in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own training opportunities, the Thai actively support our objectives of enhancing military cooperation among countries in the region.

In previous years, over 30 countries have sent observers to Cobra Gold. We have no venue comparable to Cobra Gold that brings together military officers from so many countries for a military exercise in Asia.

--Enabling the Japanese military to play a greater regional role in Asia. Under the leadership of former Japanese PM Hashimoto and current PM Abe, the Japanese Self-Defense forces are increasingly willing to play a greater role in the region but must overcome historical mistrust in order to be effective. For the past two years, working closely with Thai and Japanese military partners, we have devised a multi-year plan to gradually increase Japanese participation in Cobra Gold and thereby increase the level of confidence others in Asia have with a growing Japanese military role. This year, in addition to participating in the Cobra Gold Staff Exercise, a Japanese medical team plans to observe medical civil projects. In future years, we hope to increase Japanese participation in medical and engineering projects and hope to shape a PKO exercise scenario that could involve Japanese troops.

--Reestablishing a normal military relationship with Indonesia. After the massive U.S.-led response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, we worked with PACOM and the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta to win Indonesian participation in Cobra

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Gold. Last year, for the first time ever, Indonesia took part in a multilateral exercise involving the United States.

This year, Indonesia plans to participate again. In future years we hope to build on this momentum to have Indonesia participate in field training and other aspects of Cobra Gold thereby encouraging promising trends in the Indonesian military.

--Creating international capabilities to respond to disaster.

The enormous success of our response to the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami under Operation Unified Assistance was directly linked to Cobra Gold. The planning conferences for Cobra Gold 2005 were well underway when the tsunami struck. The U.S. Commander for Cobra Gold 2005, Marine Lieutenant General Blackman, was named the U.S. Commander for Operation Unified Assistance. Similarly, the Singaporean commander for Cobra Gold, Brigadier General Goh Kee Nguan, was in charge of Singapore's tsunami response. General Goh credited the interoperability fostered at Cobra Gold and the personal working relationships he developed with U.S. and Japanese Cobra Gold participants as directly responsible for the smooth international military response to the tsunami. During Cobra Gold, PACOM first tested its Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT) concept -- a cadre of military planners designed to execute coalition responses to contingencies. During Operation Unified Assistance, the MPAT was made fully operational and facilitated relief effort coordination among militaries from twenty one countries.

--Demonstrating America's commitment to the region. At a time when some pundits in China and elsewhere claim that the United States is not focused on Southeast Asia, Cobra Gold stands as visible proof of our commitment to maintain security in the region. Since the September 19 coup, PRC officials have openly courted Thai leaders. Royal Thai Army CINC GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin was in Beijing for four days in January where Chinese sources report he endorsed greater military cooperation between Thailand and the PRC. PM Surayud Chulanont plans to visit Beijing in April. PRC officials in Bangkok make no secret of their intention to improve links with the Thai military while U.S. coup

sanctions remain in place.

CANCELING THE EXERCISE WILL NOT SPEED UP THE RETURN TO
DEMOCRACY

¶3. (C) We have much to gain from proceeding with Cobra Gold and little to lose. Canceling Cobra Gold likely will not lead to any acceleration in the return of democracy to Thailand. The government's blueprint for writing a new constitution and holding free and fair elections this year appears to be on track, and we will continue to press Thai leaders hard at every opportunity to keep to the timetable. We have no indication that the possibility of canceling the exercise would accelerate this timeline. None of our human rights contacts has asked us to cancel the exercise and one has even cautioned that canceling could be counterproductive.

¶4. (C) We do not believe U.S. participation will be seen by the Thai or neighboring countries as endorsement of the coup. In full coordination with Washington, we continue to urge senior Thai officials to fully restore civil liberties, including the lifting of martial law as quickly as possible, and to ensure an early return to a democratically elected government. The constitutional drafting process is underway and elections are still on track to be held within one year. Participation in Cobra Gold will allow us to press home our concerns over civil liberties and underscore the need to remain on schedule with key military leaders.

¶5. (C) Post strongly recommends interagency approval for

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U.S. participation in Cobra Gold.
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